

THE BLACK SEA REGION IN THE CONTEXT OF FOUR YEARS OF WAR IN UKRAINE. THE GAME OF CHESS BETWEEN NATO, EU, RUSSIA, AND OTHER RELEVANT ACTORS

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Abstract. *The paper examines aspects related to the Black Sea Region (BSR) security environment in the context of four years of ongoing conflict in Ukraine, including most recent advances up to March 2026. The region is seen as a strategic chessboard shaped by intensifying great-power rivalry, divergent dynamics within the Alliance and the EU and the expanding use of hybrid threats. The paper aims to discuss the posture of concerned actors on the chessboard as it results from strategic documents and position statements that make up StratCom; the relation among them is also approached in the light of recent developments as a result of the regime change in the USA, for instance. And last but not least, narrative coherence is approached, bringing into attention issues such as coordination and synchronisation. All these are seen as key indicators of diplomacy during wartime. Using offensive Realism and alliance theories, as well as qualitative analysis of strategic documents, defence procurement data, and mass-media articles presenting key StratCom messages, the study argues that NATO and the EU operate as complementary but asymmetrical players whose sometimes divergent strategies determine the operational landscape and regional balance of power. Particular attention is given to the role of Romania, positioned as a frontier country for NATO’s Eastern Flank. Written from the perspective of a NATO and EU member, the paper concludes that a resolution of the conflict and the achievement of effective stability require coherent multi-domain responses, alongside enhanced cooperation and aligned Euro-Atlantic strategic planning and actions.*

Keywords: *Black Sea Region (BSR); diplomacy during wartime; defence strategy; hybrid warfare; NATO-EU strategic cooperation; strategic engagement.*

Introduction

With Russia’s actions in the last two decades (invasion of Georgia in 2008, occupation of Ukrainian territory of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent invasion of the country in 2022), reflecting its grand strategy that translates in regional hegemonic ambitions and the will to regain the status of a great world power, the Black Sea Region (BSR) has become the security centre of gravity for Europe (Gaber 2024, 1-2). In other words, the BSR can be seen as a pivotal strategic chessboard on which regional and extra-regional powers manoeuvre for influence, positional advantage and deterrence dominance. Renewed great-power rivalry, NATO’s reinforced posture, and the European Union’s growing concern with hybrid coercion have collectively transformed the region into a multi-domain battlespace in which military action, diplomacy and economic leverage converge. Russia’s hybrid strategies have fundamentally altered the equilibrium, compelling NATO and the EU to rethink how

they counter multi-vector threats that span information, cyber, and energy domains beside classical ones (land, air, maritime, and space).

The BSR is seen as a chessboard, similarly to Brzezinski's use of the expression in his book *The Grand Chessboard* (Brzezinski 2016). State and supranational actors are seen as autonomous players, some having a larger manoeuvre of action than others, depending on their power resources, position and implication in the ongoing regional events, dominated by the war in Ukraine. In using the metaphor of chess, there was taken into account that it is a game of strategy built on anticipation, patience, and cumulative advantage. Victory rarely comes through a single dramatic move; rather, it emerges from sustained positional pressure and the gradual restriction of the opponent's options. As Sun Tzu observed, "The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting" (Tzu 2005). In this sense, both chess and strategic competition in the BSR illustrate that decisive outcomes are often prepared long before the final move. Checkmate, as like strategic victory, is achieved not through impulse but through disciplined coordination, foresight, and the careful sequencing of power.

Against this backdrop, the paper argues that diplomacy during wartime is a form of strategic engagement whereby states coordinate diplomatic and military instruments, including Cognitive Warfare with its information component, as well as economic instruments to shape the adversary's behaviour, impose costs upon them and protect own strategic positions without further escalating the full-scale conflict. Framed through the metaphor of chess, war diplomacy is treated as a sequential, cumulative contest in which states employ strategic moves, anticipate counter-moves, seeking positional superiority.

The analysis draws on offensive Realism and alliance theory, combined with qualitative examination of strategic documents and defence procurement trends, as well as mass-media articles presenting key StratCom messages.

1. Hybrid Warfare as Irregular Strategic Play. Strategic Terrain and Operational Realities in the BSR

Dominated by the current attrition war in Ukraine, now in its fifth year, the Wider Black Sea Region has become an area where national and supranational actors struggle to find ways to cope with the effects of this hybrid war, impacting countries and people in multiple ways. Against this backdrop, manifestations of power projection by the actors located in the region or with interests in this area, such as the USA, result in shifts, increasing already existent challenges and rising volatility of the security environment.

The section provides a synthetic *X-ray* type of analysis related to the current security environment in the BSR, on the background of the war in Ukraine, highlighting several aspects considered important, including most recent developments¹, also providing explanations and illustrations.

A first aspect to consider is that *the war, with its hybrid components, goes beyond the two belligerent countries*, extending to Ukraine's supporting partners (NATO, the EU and their members, and the USA with its own large contributions), *entailing costs and consequences for those states and organisations*.

The EU and the North Atlantic Alliance have made a pledge on granting longstanding support to Ukraine (NATO 2026), in the name of defending democracy and the international law. Based on political will and consensus, huge aid was provided to Ukraine in funding, weapons and support equipment, training and know-how for the military and for the central administration, economic sanctions imposed on Russia, and humanitarian aid, for instance. Another direction of the aid envisages efforts to counter the Russian disinformation (EU n.d.), this aspect being also of constant internal concern for NATO and the EU.

The continuous and multidimensional aid provided to Kyiv for the past four years involved considerable economic resources (EEAS 2025), (Gutterman, Foltynova and Sijamija 2025), (Statista

¹ The analysis, elaborated in the first months of 2026, includes developments up to the beginning of March.

n.d.), (Kiel Institut 2025), (Ardelean 2025), impacting on the economies of the donor states. These expenses are publicly shown as being cost-effective actions and even resulting in economic benefits, being “significantly cheaper than the potential costs of deterring Russia in the event of its victory” (Chouet 2025), (McCusker 2024). A recent study elaborated by Corisk and the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs argues that “a Russian military victory in Ukraine would cost Europe twice as much as a Ukrainian victory” (Bjørtvedt 2025) apud (Olteanu 2025). However, in our opinion, this can also be seen as StratCom advocating for maintaining public opinion’s support for the aids, despite economic negative effects felt in the daily life even since the early stages of the war. These translate in rising inflation (Smit 2022), (Afunts, Cato and Schmidt 2024), reduced levels of consumption, and also increase of the VAT and of taxation, and even lower incomes in the public sector, as observed, for instance, in Romania.

Additionally, it should be considered that supporting Ukraine in the war may generate or enhance the risk of vulnerability to Moscow’s threat, especially for the countries located in its proximity that make up NATO’s Eastern Flank. Thus, there were several reports of Russian drones incursions and drones or parts of drones fallen in Romania and in Poland (Starinac and Bostenaru 2025), (Drilea 2023), Romanian authorities reaction evolving throughout the war developments (Euronews 2025), (Dima 2025). It should be kept in mind that a state supporting Kyiv becomes an adversary of Kremlin and, consequently, a target of its information warfare. One example of the Russian aggressive rhetoric is the nuclear bomb threat (Reuters 2024). The threat narrative has also been present in the past years, with NATO SecGen and member countries senior military warnings of such a possible outcome, for instance in Germany (Gardner and Wong 2025) and in Romania (Observator 2024). The NATO SecGen’s declaration in December 2025 that «members of the Alliance could be “Russia’s next target”» (CNN 2025) in the following years serves as a compelling argument “for a rapid rise in defense spending to prevent a war similar to those seen by past generations” (CNN 2025). The timeframe for such a possible attack, announced since early 2024, varies between three, five or eight years, extending up to a decade (Financial Times 2024) (Daily Mail 2024).

However, the media also reflected contrasting instances of StratCom, reassuring the public that such a threat does not exist. Illustrations come from the former NATO SecGen’s statement at the end of January 2024 that no direct or imminent threat against an ally was perceived (NATO SG 2024) and, similarly, from the former Romanian Prime Minister, stating, in an electoral year, that there is no threat of an attack against the country, contrary to the declaration of the Chief of the General Staff (Observator 2024). These divergent public communication messages, occurring within a short period of time (January-February 2024), indicate a lack of coordination both at the Alliance level and between political and military authorities at the national level, in some European states². The situation generates a negative cognitive and emotional impact on the public opinion in NATO member countries and at the same time makes them vulnerable to Russia, which exploits such aspects and causes them to backfire in the form of disinformation/hostile narratives.

As seen, *the war, with its hybrid components, goes beyond the two belligerent countries*, as it extends to the supporting partners as well, with negative consequences spanning across their populations. Referring to the cognitive dimension, following media monitorisation throughout the conflict development, it can be stated that *all parties involved use information as a weapon* in various ways, aiming to maximise the chances of victory. This translates, for instance, in contrasting narratives and reciprocal accusations of disinformation and propaganda³. Contrasting narratives regarding the dead and casualty tolls of Russia and Ukraine, for example, may produce several effects: they generate confusion for the adversary, represent an element of power projection in relation to the adversary when displaying a larger number of victims and have a positive impact upon the morale of

² For more details, see Daniela Lică, “Dezinformarea în contextul a doi ani de război în Ucraina” in *Colocviu strategic* nr. 2/2024 (Lică 2024).

³ *Ibidem*.

one's own military and population when lower numbers are made public. As for reciprocal accusations, while Ukraine and the West repeatedly assert that Russia employs cognitive warfare against them (EEAS n.d.), the Kremlin accuses Ukraine, the EU, and NATO of lying (WION 2025). Consequently, *a continuous information chaos results*, on an infodemic⁴ background, whose *effects* (of a cognitive nature – psychological and emotional), *push the war* beyond the military sphere, *into daily life*. Moreover, the disinformation process is developed progressively with the application of the latest technological developments, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), and brain-machine interfaces (BMI).

Another important characteristic factor not only for this area, but for the global security environment as well is the *very high dynamics and volatility also reflected in bilateral and multilateral relations*. This aspect is of major concern in the current war context, which is already challenging, in multiple ways. An illustration is the major shift in the USA foreign policy with President Trump's second term-in-office, showing a pragmatic nationalist view, based on transactional relations. The President's declarations and actions place the EU, NATO, and their member countries in challenging positions, making them wonder whether the alliance and strategic partnership are still valid.

The promise to «make America great again» translated in MAGA policies included the intention to impose additional trade fees to foreign actors such as the EU, generating great economic costs. Brussels responded in a similar way, and diplomatic talks were ongoing for months (Le Monde with AFP 2025), until a deal was finally agreed at the end of July last year (Commission 2025). Former close diplomatic ties have come under scrutiny, especially with the USA ambition to acquire Greenland from Denmark, an Allied country (Belin 2025). Subsequently, the EU provided a prudent diplomatic response, in order to prevent worsening of relations in a challenging security context. Some analysts considered this a “cacophony [showing] weakness at home and abroad” (Balfour 2026), with a chance to be turned into strategic ambiguity, should the anti-coercion instrument (ACI) be applied. The ACI allows the EU to take deterrence and retaliatory measures if established that a foreign actor makes use of economic coercion to undermine Brussels (Balfour 2026).

Regarding USA-NATO relations, the American leader adopted an ambiguous StratCom, casting doubt upon allies at key moments on the commitment to Article 5 (Lunday, Traylor and Kayali 2025), (Liptak 2025), while emphasising that their contribution is the largest and asking the Allies at The Hague 2025 Summit to bolster defence spending from 2% to 5% over the following decade (Liptak 2025).

With these challenges, the division among EU member states (some of which are also NATO members) comes as an additional problem in handling the transatlantic relation. Europe is still dependent on the USA for granting its security, both economically and cognitively (as a reflection of a post-communist educated diplomatic mindset) (Balfour 2026). A blunt piece of StratCom in this respect is that of NATO SecGen stating that Europe does not have a chance to defend itself without USA support unless defence spending were increased to 10% to create a nuclear capability (Danaher 2026), which is quite unrealistic, having in mind the current economic situation.

As observed, the recently released American strategic documents do not prioritise Europe, and do not even mention the Black Sea. When presenting issues of concern for Europe, the 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) points to “insufficient military spending and economic stagnation” (The White House 2025, 25), as well as “migration policies [...] transforming the continent and creating strife, censorship of free speech and suppression of political opposition” (The White House 2025, 25). Additionally, the EU is described as undermining “political liberty and sovereignty” (The White House 2025, 25). As for the 2026 National Defense Strategy (NDS), it stipulates increasing the burden sharing with Allies and Partners and putting an end to their dependency, also pointing that they must take the lead against threats that are more severe for Europe than for the USA (Department of War 2026, 4).

⁴ *Infodemy* refers to a massive amount of widely and rapidly circulating information about a particular crisis or controversial issue, consisting of a confusing combination of fact, falsehood, rumour, and opinion (Dictionary.com 2024).

Additionally, there is the *issue of strategic and vital resources*, primarily energy, and the challenges for ensuring it lead to a continuum of competition that can either result in cooperation or in confrontation. An important aspect with impact on security regards the European dependency on Russian oil, gas and nuclear energy imports, allowing Kremlin to use it as a weapon, as “hydrocarbons are not simply a market commodity but a key element of the hybrid toolkit to advance its strategic interests” (Gaber 2024). Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the EU has committed itself to gradually reduce and ultimately put an end to this dependency through the REPowerEU strategy. Thus, EU reliance on Russian gas has decreased from about half of overall imports, namely 45% in early 2022 to 12% in 2025, while oil imports diminished from 27% at the beginning of 2022 to only 2%, at present having two EU countries importing Russian oil (Hungary and Slovakia). At the end of January 2026, the EU adopted a regulation (EURLex 2026) aiming to gradually and permanently put a ban on Russian oil imports by no later than 2027, with the overall goal of strengthening Europe’s energy security and independence (European Commission 2026).

The last aspect to be mentioned is related to the *uncertainty and lack of perspective for a cease of fire*, as peace talks between Russia and the Ukraine, going on since mid-May 2025, have been difficult and led to no concrete results. More concretely, peace negotiations have been characterised by conflicting attitudes, each of the belligerent parties claiming to desire peace while accusing the opposing side of not wanting it. A very recent survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KMIS), has shown that about 70% of Ukrainian people do not believe in a positive outcome of the negotiations (Charter 97 2026). Following media monitoring throughout the period, a continuous tendency to condemn and even demonise the adversary can be noticed, as well as a lack of willingness for conciliation, with each side conditioning the adversary, territorial claims being the unsurpassable aspect of negotiations (Ehl 2025). As a result, peace negotiations have paradoxically turned in a war of statements and, what is more, escalations of the conflict can be seen on the ground (Lederer 2026) (Kakissis and Fadel 2025). At present, there is no agreed scenario on what the outcome of the war could be and how Ukraine will look like in terms of frontier with the Russian Federation (Global Times 2026), including access to the Black Sea. The USA has been putting pressure to resolve the conflict, hopefully by summer (Lederer 2026). Moreover, by engaging, together with Israel, in a new conflict in Iran, which has been expanding across the Middle East, the USA is facing additional security challenges, and President Trump’s actions have been largely criticised (Walldorf 2026). Although happening at a distance from Europe and the region under current focus, concrete effects have been felt in this area as well, for instance regarding repeated increase in fuel prices in Romania (Grigorescu 2026).

Summing up, the key aspects addressed dwell on the following: the war, with its hybrid components, extends beyond the two belligerent countries, entailing costs and various consequences for the states and organisations supporting Ukraine; all parties involved use information as a weapon on the background of the conflict, resulting in a continuous information chaos pushing the war into daily life; the very high dynamics and volatility reflected in bilateral and multilateral relations, with reference to the relations between the USA and NATO and especially with the EU; European dependency on the USA for granting its security; the issue of strategic and vital resources, primarily energy, with the European dependency of the Russian oil; and last, but not least, the uncertainty and lack of perspective for a ceasefire.

For the near future, there needs to be taken into account that no matter what the result will be, Ukraine will further need consistent and multidimensional support to recover from the war. From a national point of view, Romania has to be a part of the process, as Ukraine is its neighbour (Colibășanu 2026). Also, we consider that cooperation among regional actors, the EU and NATO included, will be of the highest importance, and USA support, as a major world power would also be beneficial, especially from a financial point of view.

2. Strategic Indicators of Diplomacy During Wartime

The wider Black Sea Region has evolved into a multidomain theatre defined by structural rivalry, hybrid confrontation, and institutional balancing. The war in Ukraine has fundamentally

transformed the regional security architecture, producing a condition of continuous strategic contestation rather than episodic crises. In order to better understand the positioning of Russia, NATO, the EU, and Romania on the BSR chessboard, doctrinal documents are going to be analysed, providing essential aspects from these, as key indicators of war diplomacy actions.

2.1. Doctrinal Posture and Escalation Logic

Strategic documents provide codified expressions of threat perception and escalation logic, therefore, analysing doctrine is indispensable for understanding the way of thinking that lies at the foundation of an actor's narratives and actions that constitute diplomacy, especially in a war context (Echevarria 2017, 88-104), (Gray 1999).

Russian hybrid activities in NATO and EU countries, such as cyber attacks and influence activities – operating below the threshold of declared war – illustrate limited coercion designed to establish *faits accomplis* while avoiding full-scale escalation. These dynamics align with broader understandings of grey-zone competition (Rid 2012). Official Russian documents frame such measures within narratives of sovereignty protection and resistance to external interference (President of the Russian Federation 2021).

Thus, the Russian Federation's National Security Strategy explicitly identifies NATO expansion and Western military infrastructure near Russian borders as primary threats, perceiving the Alliance's activity as destabilising and emphasising Russia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (President of the Russian Federation 2021).

The Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation designates the Black Sea as a priority region for safeguarding sovereignty and projecting naval power, reinforcing the importance of fleet modernisation and maritime sovereignty in the Black Sea (President of the Russian Federation 2022).

These documents articulate a Russian posture centred on layered defence, maritime dominance, and resistance to perceived encirclement, which generates structural insecurity for NATO's Eastern Flank states, particularly Romania and Bulgaria.

NATO's Strategic Concept characterises Russia as “the most significant and direct threat” (NATO 2022, 4) to Allied security and commits to strengthened forward defence and deterrence-by-denial, multidomain integration, and high-readiness forces (NATO 2022, 4).

Alliance responses reflect balance-of-threat dynamics, whereby states align against perceived aggressive intent rather than power alone (S. Walt 1987, 17-33), (Snyder 1997, 180-192), (S. M. Walt 2010), (Niemi 2026), or in other words, threat perception plays a determinant role (Cohen 1978). Enhanced forward presence, rotational deployments, and increased defence expenditure documented in NATO's Defence Expenditure Report for the period 2014–2023 illustrate institutionalised balancing (NATO 2023).

NATO doctrinal documents, as well as other public statements – both illustrations of StratCom – signal preparedness, reinforcing collective defence commitments, and emphasising integrated conventional and nuclear deterrence. These communications serve as a proof of the credibility of its posture, a few illustrative examples including the NATO Strategic Concept (NATO 2022) and Summits Declarations, most recently at The Hague in June 2025 (NATO 2025).

The European Union regulatory and resilience-oriented instruments complement NATO's military posture. Thus, the EU Strategic Compass prioritises resilience and hybrid threat response through a comprehensive Hybrid Toolbox, encompassing cyber defence, critical infrastructure protection, including maritime infrastructure, and countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) (EU 2022). Additionally, the EU Cybersecurity Strategy further emphasises institutional resilience against state-sponsored malicious cyber activities (European Commission 2020).

The Joint EU-NATO Declaration in 2023 highlights “the importance of the transatlantic bond” (NATO 2023) while acknowledging that the context requires for an even closer cooperation. Thus, the two organisations commit to further mobilizing the “combined set of instruments [...], be they political, economic or military [...], strengthening cooperation in existing areas” (NATO 2023), and

increasing it in the following fields: “growing geostrategic competition, resilience [...], protection of critical infrastructures, emerging and disruptive technologies, space, security implications of climate change, as well as FIMI” (NATO 2023). This discursive alignment reduces fragmentation and strengthens institutional credibility.

From a national point of view, Romania’s National Defence Strategy for the period 2025–2030 aligns national priorities with NATO and EU frameworks, identifying the BRS as a highly important strategic area and emphasising the need to develop national capabilities of defence and resilience and interoperability with the allies and partners (Romanian Presidency 2025, Ch. 5, para. 103). The Military Strategy of Romania from 2021, still in force, envisaged as national military objective (for the period up to 2024) an increase of the presence of Allied and partner forces in the region, while facilitating mobility, collocation and deployment (Ministry of National Defence of Romania 2021, 12); nevertheless, it should be taken into account that the cited document precedes the outburst of the war in Ukraine, an updated version being currently in final stages of elaboration.

As a preliminary conclusion, we consider that narrative convergence across national and supranational levels (for instance NATO), referring to doctrine and various position statements, constitutes a core indicator of war diplomacy in practice.

2.2. Diplomacy during wartime and Strategic Competition in the BSR

Diplomacy during wartime translates in the coordinated use of military posture, economic instruments, and diplomatic signalling. This approach builds upon the Clausewitzian understanding of war as a continuation of politics (Clausewitz 1976) and on coercive diplomacy frameworks emphasising the manipulation of adversary expectations through credible signalling (Schelling 1966, 1-34; 69-91), (George 1991, 4-11). Deterrence seeks to prevent adversarial action by raising anticipated costs (Huth 1988, 20-35), (Jervis 1989, 1-28), while compellence attempts to induce behavioural change through sustained pressure (Byman and Waxman 2002, 30-45), (Pape 1996, 12-18).

As observed, strategic manoeuvre unfolds cumulatively across the Black Sea Region chessboard. NATO’s reinforcement measures, EU sanctions regimes, and national defence modernisation interact sequentially, shaping adversary cost-benefit calculations over time. Such incremental positioning reflects a strategic logic of gradual environment-shaping rather than decisive confrontation (Gray 1999, 121-128), (Mazarr 2015, 9-28). From a structural perspective, the regional strategic behaviour can be interpreted through the logic of power maximisation under anarchy (Waltz 1979, 102-128), (J. J. Mearsheimer 2014, 30-36).

In the current security context, deterrence-by-denial through forward defence operates in the BSR alongside economic sanctions and diplomatic coordination. To sum up, it can be stated that the regional security environment is shaped by a layered strategic interaction, in which military deterrence, economic sanctions, regulatory coordination, and narrative competition operate simultaneously.

2.3. Strategic Narratives as Diplomatic Tool and the Importance of Coordination

Strategic narratives, by shaping perceptions, attitudes and behaviours, impact on political decisions and military actions legitimacy, and also upon national cohesion and cohesion within supranational entities such as NATO and the EU, and, not least, upon escalation thresholds.

In this context, NATO’s official documents and communications, for instance, show a defensive posture grounded in collective security commitments (NATO 2022), while the Russian ones portray NATO expansion as a threat to its sovereignty and stability (President of the Russian Federation 2021) and use this as a legitimisation for the ongoing war in Ukraine (President of the Russian Federation 2022). Simultaneously, Russian naval modernisation, as articulated in the maritime doctrine, underscores sustained regional ambition and capacity for sea denial (President of the Russian Federation 2022).

Romania's strategic narratives reflected in documents and official discourse situate national defence within the broader Euro-Atlantic framework, reinforcing alignment with the two organisations and strategic coherence (Romanian Presidency 2025, 4-6).

Discursive synchronisation and coordination among NATO and EU members, and also between the two organisations, enhance credibility and reduce opportunities for adversaries to exploit internal divergences. Accordingly, it can be stated that strategic narratives are a valuable diplomatic tool.

3. Romania's Strategic Posture on NATO's Eastern Flank

Romania's strategic posture on NATO's Eastern Flank can be best understood through the combined lenses of offensive realism, alliance theory, and theories of cooperation under anarchy (Waltz 1979, 102-128), (J. J. Mearsheimer 2014, 30-36), (S. Walt 1987, 17-33), (Snyder 1997, 180-192), (Keohane 1984, 49-64). Together, these approaches illuminate how a medium power positioned in a contested geopolitical space seeks to maximise security, manage asymmetries relative to great powers, and reduce vulnerability in an environment characterised by constant change, hybrid threats, and persistent revisionism (Axelrod 1984, 12-20), (Hoffman 2009, 34-36), (Lanoszka 2016, 175-182). Diplomacy during wartime thus emerges not as a departure from realist logic but as its contemporary operationalisation under conditions of sub-threshold conflict, where coercion, signalling, and selective cooperation coexist as instruments of strategic competition (Schelling 1966, 12-20), (NATO 2022), (Romanian Presidency 2025).

3.1. Deterrence and Resilience through the Lens of Offensive Realism

From the perspective of offensive Realism, the Black Sea Region represents a classic arena of power competition in which states operate under conditions of anarchy and uncertainty regarding the intentions of others (J. J. Mearsheimer 2014, 29-36). Russia's military build-up, anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) posture, and use of hybrid instruments confirm the realist assumption that great powers seek to maximise relative power and shape regional order in their favour.

Romania's emphasis on deterrence and resilience reflects a rational response to the structural constraints imposed by its position on NATO's Eastern Flank and proximity to a revisionist power in the Black Sea. From an offensive realist perspective, states exposed to heightened threats prioritise survival through capability enhancement rather than power maximisation or normative restraint (Waltz 1979, 126), (J. J. Mearsheimer 2014, 29-36).

While trying to balance its inequities with strategic alliances, Romania has therefore focused on deterrence by denial, investing in territorial defence, host-nation support, and critical infrastructure resilience while embedding these efforts within NATO's collective defence framework (S. Walt 1987, 17-18), (NATO 2022).

Within this context, diplomacy during wartime deepens limited national power by linking military preparedness with diplomatic signalling and alliance credibility. Strategic Communication and participation in multinational exercises reinforces perceptions of determination among allies and shapes adversary expectations, making deterrence a relational process grounded in alliance politics rather than material capabilities alone (Snyder 1997, 43-45; 180-192).

3.2. Alliance Politics and Strategic Partnerships – Insights from Alliance Theory

Alliance theory provides further explanatory leverage for understanding Romania's strategic behaviour. Classical alliance theorists emphasise that states align not out of ideological affinity, but in response to threats (S. Walt 1987, 17-18). Romania's deepening strategic partnerships with the United States, the United Kingdom, and France can be interpreted as a form of external balancing against perceived Russian revisionism in the Black Sea.

At the same time, alliance theory highlights the twin risks of abandonment and entrapment (Snyder 1997, 43-45; 180-192). Romania's security strategy seeks to minimise abandonment by

demonstrating commitment, interoperability, and burden-sharing within NATO. Forward presence, defence spending increases, and procurement aligned with Allied standards are signals designed to reassure major Allies of Romania's reliability and at the same time of its strategic value in the region.

These dynamics underscore that Romania's partnerships are not merely bilateral security arrangements, but instruments through which alliance credibility and deterrence are co-produced.

While Realism traditionally privileges competition, contemporary theories of cooperation under anarchy demonstrate that states may engage in limited, functional cooperation when interests converge and institutions reduce uncertainty (Keohane 1984, 12-20), (Axelrod 1984, 124-141). Romania's trilateral cooperation with Türkiye and Bulgaria, reflected in the Mine Countermeasures Black Sea Task Group (MCM BSTG) reveals such logic. From a diplomatic perspective, trilateral formats act as confidence-building mechanisms that stabilise interaction without diluting deterrence.

Defence procurement decisions are central to Romania's strategic alignment and reflect core realist assumptions about power and security. Offensive realism emphasises that military capabilities underpin credibility, while alliance theory highlights interoperability as a key determinant of alliance effectiveness (J. Mearsheimer 2001, 31; 55-57), (Snyder 1997, 43-45; 180-192).

Romania's acquisition of U.S. and European systems – particularly in air defence, naval platforms, and command-and-control – serves multiple strategic functions: enhancing national deterrence, embedding Romania within NATO's operational ecosystem, and signalling long-term commitment to alliance priorities in the Black Sea (NATO 2022), (Ministry of National Defence of Romania 2021).

In this sense, it can be stated that defence procurement functions as a sort of conclusive diplomacy, in the sense that it is costly, durable, and politically binding, thus linking military modernisation with alliance cohesion. Diplomacy during wartime thus operates at the intersection of defence economics and strategic alignment, reinforcing deterrence and reducing the risks of alliance abandonment (Snyder 1997, 43-45; 180-192).

Conclusions

The paper provided an analysis of the Black Sea Region security environment, where the region is envisaged as a strategic chessboard dominated by the war in Ukraine, entered in its fifth year. Following other Russian actions in the region in last two decades, expressing its longing to regain former status of a great world power and regional hegemon, this war turned once again the area in the security centre of gravity for Europe.

As observed, the war's multiple effects are dominating regional security, characterised by intensifying great-power rivalry, divergent dynamics within NATO and the EU and the expanding use of hybrid threats. Specific aspects of diplomacy during wartime are revealed, having as protagonists both regional and international actors, seen as chess players. Also, major impacts of the war for the countries supporting Ukraine are discussed. Thus, apart from challenges of military nature, such as drones incursions and parts of drones fallen on NATO's Eastern Flank countries, other challenges, such as economic and even societal ones have emerged or deepened on the background of the war.

Power projection manifestations by actors either located in the region (Russia, Türkiye, Romania), operating herein (NATO, the EU), or having strategic interests in the area (the USA), result in shifts, increasing already existent challenges and rising volatility of the security environment. Another aspect worth mentioning is that capability development reinforces the competitive structure of the region.

The current span of hybrid threats compels NATO and the EU to rethink their ways and means to counter such challenges. A key conclusion is that the two actors operate as complementary players, whose strategies and actions determine the regional balance of power. However, it should be noticed that they are not symmetrical players – primarily, the EU is not a military-focused entity; additionally, the two organisations sometimes have divergent strategies and position statements, which impact the operational landscape. Nevertheless, this asymmetry does not undermine their effectiveness, but it produces a layered structure, where military deterrence, combined with economic instruments,

institutional coordination, and ultimately Strategic Communication interact in a complex way, reinforcing deterrence credibility, while revealing the weak points in the Euro-Atlantic strategic partnership, also reflected in the security framework. Thus, NATO and the EU should assume which of the two takes on the leader and respectively the supporter role, on a case by case issue. Also, Europeans need to assume their own security without depending so much on US contribution, having in mind the American engagement other parts of the world, namely in the Middle East and the focus on China. Moreover, European strategic autonomy that has become a buzz word in the past years should be put in practice. In this respect, the paper argues that restoring security and safeguarding stability on the BSR chessboard requires synchronised Euro-Atlantic approaches, enhanced cooperation and greater integration of military and diplomatic tools within coherent multi-domain responses.

In our opinion, war diplomacy in the BSR operates through narrative coordination and synchronisation, including doctrine, and also through capability development, to include procurement. Another important regional characteristic translates in a continuous competition below the threshold of open conflict. Together, these elements shape the regional balance of power, and at the same time they define the operational landscape.

For coherence and credibility issues, we consider that there needs to be a convergence between strategic documents, public declarations and position statements, especially in the context of ongoing conflict developments. Otherwise, unpredictability, contradictory declarations and/or contradictions between words and actions may lead to additional challenges for other actors while they make efforts to cope with the impacts of the conflict.

In terms of perspective, regardless of the war's outcome, it is important needs to take into account that Ukraine will further need consistent and multidimensional support to recover. Speaking from a national point of view, as a neighbouring state, Romania will most probably be a part of the process. Cooperation among regional actors, the EU and NATO included, will be of high importance, as well as US support.

In the light of the aspects developed in the paper, two open questions arise for further reflection, addressed to any potential reader: in the current war context, in terms of threat perception, where can a line be drawn between an adversarial actor's proactive measures, deterrence and escalation of conflict? And the second question – in an age where the power of words is acknowledged, why is defence diplomacy not put to work in positive terms, to resolve the conflict, but in negative ones, maintaining and further fuelling it?

All in all, diplomacy nevertheless will need to provide a viable solution to the current war destabilising the region and consuming resources, while affecting lots of humans, both directly and indirectly. Thus, political will, cooperation, and compromise seem the only way towards maintaining an equilibrium, as everything is interconnected in geopolitics.

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